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FOREIGN SERVICE DESPATCH

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SUBJECT: President Arbenz Seeks to Reassure Army Officers on Policies of His Administration.

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A number of reports reaching the Embassy agree that President Arbenz held an unpublicized meeting with one hundred or more senior Guatemalan Army officers on November 18, that he attempted to explain to them the domestic and international policies of his government, including its approach to Communism, and that the officers heard him out without either specifically endorsing or censuring his regime. From this core of agreement, the reports vary widely in details as to precisely what was said, but the fact that President Arbenz apparently felt it necessary to justify himself to the military at this time is a further reflection of his administration's nervousness about the present situation.

That this meeting was actually held is a fact established by a previous remark by Colonel Enrique PERALTA, Guatemalan Military Attaché in Washington, to Colonel McCormick, the Embassy Military Attaché, that it was scheduled for November 18 and his later report, without details, that it was held. It included the officers of the high command, troop commanders and staff officers from Guatemala City and at least some senior officers from the regional military commands in the provinces. The total number present has variously been reported as from 100 to 400. The commander of the Zacapa Military District is reliably reported to have flown in for the occasion and the newspaper La Hora of November 20 noted the calls of many high ranking officers at the National Palace. It quoted without comment a statement by Chief of Staff (Colonel Enrique PARINELLO) that the officers had to come to call on Colonel José Angel SANCHEZ, Minister of Defense, to congratulate him on his birthday, but the Minister's birthday actually passed some months ago.

What actually transpired at the meeting is difficult to reconstruct in detail from fragmentary reports. President Arbenz apparently spoke of the situation at some length and invited questions. According to an indirectly-contacted military source who claims to have talked to an officer present, the

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President was asked about Guatemala's seeming international isolation and replied by acknowledging that while there were some diplomatic difficulties, the "peoples" of other countries were with Guatemala. He was asked about reports of Communism in government and replied by acknowledging that while there were a few in the public administration, there were none "in the government" (i.e. the Cabinet) and none who were influential. The officer transmitting this information characterized the President's answers as a "brush-off."

A separate source reported that Colonel Arbenz had told the officers present that concession to the United States would mean that he would be required to arrest a number of designated persons and that the list would include as "Communists" anyone opposed to the United Fruit Company.

An anonymous letter, purporting by content to be from an officer present at the meeting, reached a senior United States Army officer stationed here on November 20. Its tone was that of a strong anti-Communist contemptuous or hostile to Colonel Arbenz and it reported that the President had tried, in substance, to reassure the officers present that there was no danger of attack from the Soviet Union and that the danger of war came from the United States which was in an economic crisis and could be saved only by a war economy. He had further complained about U.S. press attacks, particularly the recent LIFE magazine article, on Guatemala. The judgment of the U.S. officer receiving the letter (it is the latest of a series) is that it was probably written by a senior Guatemalan officer, although it was impossible to tell to what extent his reporting of the President's remarks was colored.

This report and others reaching the Embassy convey an impression that an atmosphere of almost silent hostility prevailed at the meeting between the military and the President. The anonymous report uses such terms as "made foolish statements" in describing the President's remarks, other reports indicate that the few questions were politely but implicitly critical, and no report indicates that by statement or line of questioning any officer indicated support of the President's viewpoint.

There is some evidence that this meeting is one of several which the President has had recently with military leaders. It is known, for instance, that this is the second time that the Zacapa Commander has flown in in the past ten days, while President Arbenz's farm manager has described to one of his friends a meeting between the President and his military chiefs which could only have taken place before November 15.

According to two sources, President Arbenz offered at the November 18 meeting or at a previous one to resign the Presidency

and turn the government over to Colonel Carlos Enrique DIAZ, Chief of the Armed Forces, but neither report indicated whether the alleged offer was rhetorical or meant as a serious offer. (Embassy Tel. 126, November 19, 1950) The tenor of his fragmentarily reported remarks at the November 18 meeting would seem to indicate that the remark, if made, was for effect, and reflected more the dramatic attitude of a nervous president than a considered course of action.

Underlying the meeting or meetings is doubtless the fact that the Guatemalan Armed Forces' officer corps is becoming increasingly irritated about its inability to obtain arms and equipment. The Department's policy has effectively closed the United States market to them and the hopes which were fostered by the Administration for alternate supplies from Europe have simply not materialized in sufficient quantities to meet the situation. Colonel Peralta, who is here in connection with this problem, has held several conversations with the Army Attaché and one with the Embassy in which he has in substance pleaded for relaxation on the grounds that the Guatemalan Armed Forces are anti-Communist and that rigid application of a U.S. ban on exports of arms and equipment was fostering anti-U.S. sentiment among the officers. Nonetheless, the observations of the Embassy's Service Attachés and other U.S. military personnel over the past few months would indicate that the difficulty in obtaining arms has been a factor in stimulating the normally politically apathetic officers' corps to reflect on the situation and to note the increasing isolation of Guatemala in the hemisphere, and the increasingly visible manifestations of Communism at home. The officers may not yet be said to have abandoned their often-reported loyalty to Colonel Arbenz, but at the moment they are wondering and speculating more than hitherto about his actions.

FOR THE AMBASSADOR

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